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A NOTE ON THE MURRAY BLACK COLLECTION OF AUSTRALIAN ABORIGINAL SKELETONS

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Introduction

George Murray Black, a graduate in Engineering of the University of Melbourne and a pastoralist in South Gippsland for the past quarter century, has taken a keen interest in the excavation and collection of aboriginal remains. This natural interest had been encouraged by the late Sir Colin McKenzie and Murray Black had collected many skulls and other bones which are now housed in the Institute of Anatomy at Canberra. After McKenzie's death, Murray Black severed his connection with Canberra but, with undiminished enthusiasm for field work, carried on his activities for the University of Melbourne. It is due, almost entirely, to his generosity, care and patience that the Anatomy Department in the University of Melbourne now possesses a collection of aboriginal skeletal material which ranks amongst the best in the world. Not only was Murray Black responsible for the field work as such, but he cheerfuly undertook the financial responsibilty and it is to him that the University and the science of physical anthropology are greatly indebted.

This collection was obtained from burial sites in the Murray River basin extending from just east of Renmark to just east of Swan Hill. Therefore, it will be appreciated that these remains were obtained from a very restricted area in relation to the continent of Australia (Figs. 1 and 2). The greatest single feature about the collection, however, is that the remains were retained as skeletons so that, by reference to the structure of the pelvis, the sex could be accurately determined. It is this feature which places the Murray Black Collection apart from most others and greatly increases its value to the physical anthropologist.

This collection was made with the objective of accumulating sufficient skeletal material to be of value in osteometric studies. Most of the field work was carried out intermittently over the war years and there was, regrettably, neither the time nor the opportunity for the field parties to acquire any evidence as to the antiquity of the remains. This material is now the basis of a detailed study of the metrical and non-metrical features of the skeleton of the Australian Aboriginal.

Method of Collection

The method of collection was relatively simple. The field party prospected for burial grounds after obtaining as much information as possible from local settlers. Excavation was nearly always carried out in sand hills and the depth rarely exceeded 6 ft. Any unusual features were noted but no attempt was made to geologically date the graves. The excavated material was carefully catalogued, but not all the material recovered was returned to Melbourne because a large proportion of it was not suitable for measurement. No material was discarded, however, until it had been checked by members of the staff of the Anatomy Department.

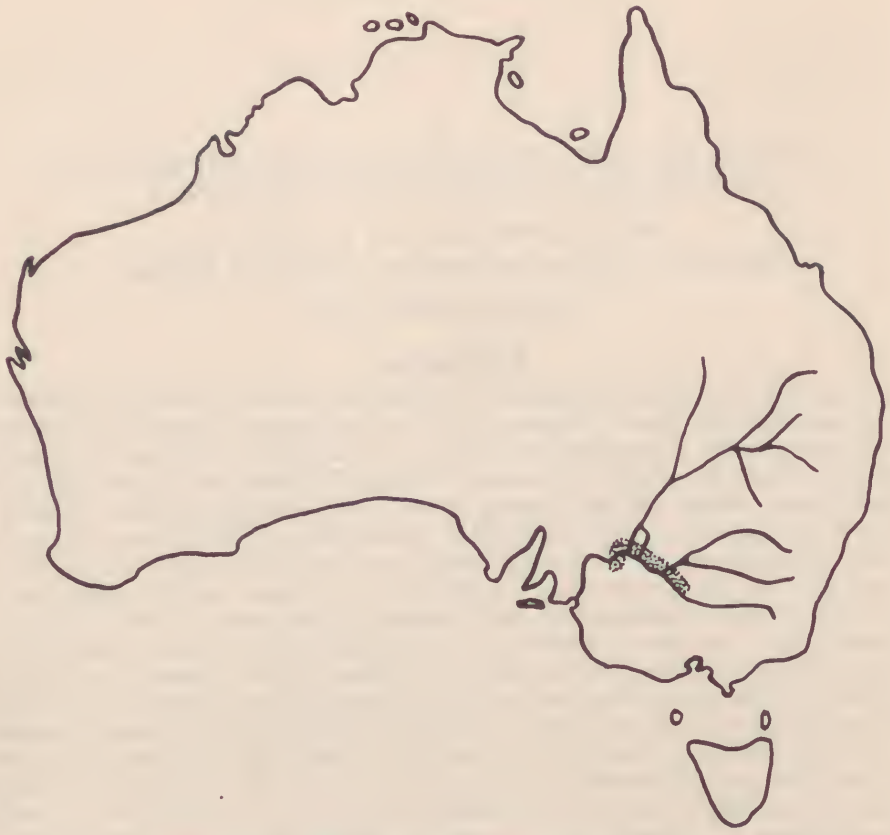

FIG. 1.—The shaded area indicates the restricted locality in the SE. of Australia.

When the material was returned to Melbourne, it was checked, washed, catalogued, and the bones numbered. As a result there are representatives of 804 skeletons, included in which are over 500 skulls of which 252 and 154 are known to be male and female respectively. The remaining skulls are catalogued as unsexed because no accurate reference to the pelvis could be made.

Localities

Although numerous burial grounds were uncovered in the period from 1943 to 1950, it is convenient for purposes of a brief description of the grave sites to group these into areas.

CHOWILLA AREA

Numerous burial sites were uncovered in this area. The soil was sandy in most instances, but in two sites, located in a lake bank, it varied from heavy to clay. The skeletons were located at depths of 3-4 ft. In any one burial site there was considerable constancy in the alignment of the remains. However, over different sites this would vary from N.-S. with heads to the N., or E.-W. with the heads either E. or W.

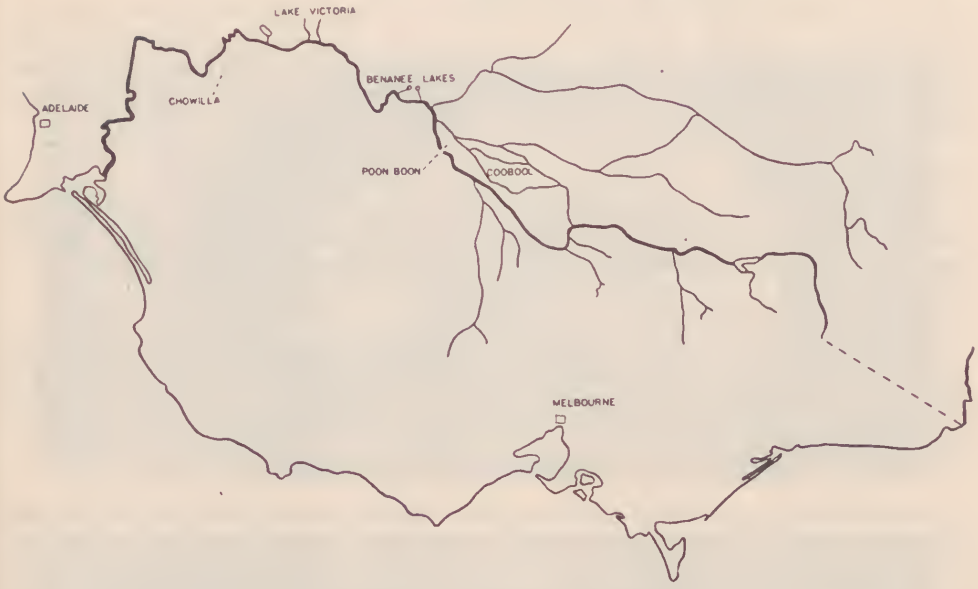

Fig. 2.—The location of the major burial sites.

Most graves showed evidence of burning, ranging from the presence of ashes and charcoal in the graves to considerable charring of the bones. There was no definite evidence of any covering to the remains.

In three areas numerous skulls were found in which there was extensive fracturing over the temporal region (Pl. VI, fig. 1). In at least one of these areas the fracturing involved the under side of the skull.

Numerous pieces of kopi were found in the vicinity of these graves together with miscellaneous flints and scrapers.

Rufus River—Lake Victoria Area

In this area many burial sites were investigated in sandy soil which varied in colour rather than in consistency. The depth of these burials ranged from 3-6 ft. In most of these sites the majority were lying in a N.-S. direction with the heads to the N.; in others the remains were lying in an E.-W. direction. In two graves there was evidence of burning. In only two graves was there evidence that bark coverings had been used. There were some old scars on trees adjacent to one grave, but whether this was associated with the burial site or merely coincidental could not be determined.

Some bone awls and shell remnants were found in the vicinity of two graves.

Euston—Lake Benanee Area

Nine burial grounds were excavated in this area, all of them being in sand or a sandy loam type of soil, and the remains were lying 3-5 ft. from the surface.

There did not appear to be any general rule governing the position of the body throughout the area, but in each burial ground there was some measure of constancy. The remains were lying mostly N.-S., but in some grounds they were lying E.-W., while in others there were further variations. The method of 'laying-out' the

remains varied although most were stretched out on the back. In this area evidence of attempts to burn the remains was common. In some instances the bones were extensively charred, and in many graves there was considerable charcoal and ash below the skeleton as well as on top of it. Evidence of a bark covering over the remains was present in only three sites.

Poon-Boon Area

In this area there was no constancy as to the direction of burial. In some graves the remains were all aligned in the same way, but this did not always apply. Mostly the remains were fully extended, but some were fully flexed or 'doubled up'.

Nacurrie—Coobool Area

The remains were lying either in an E.-W. or in a N.-S. direction in about equal proportions. Most of the skeletons were lying in a fully extended position, but in a few cases the skeleton was 'doubled up'. In some the arms were bent and in others lying straight out.

Summary

The direction in which the remains were buried followed no constant pattern, although within individual burial grounds they were lying either N.-S. or E.-W. The position of these remains in the grave varied. The majority were lying more or less extended on the back, but variations in the position of the head and the arms were common and indeed, in many cases, the bodies were buried on the side or 'doubled up' (Pl. VI, figs. 2, 3; Pl. VII, figs. 4-6).

The question of attempts at incineration is also open. In many graves there was no indication of burning although some charcoal was found over the graves. This could be due, of course, to subsequent camp fires. In some, however, there was definite evidence of charring of the bones and charcoal both above and below the remains.

In a few cases rotted bark was found laid over the remains, presumably the remnants of a form of covering after death.

Other inclusions were found such as the so-called 'widow's caps'. Located in the vicinity, if not actually with the skeletons, were numerous scrapers and flints. A few stone dishes were also found in the vicinity of these burial grounds, but there was no evidence to relate these with any ritual burial.

Explanation of Plates

Murray Black Collection

Plates VI, VII

Fig. 1.—Depressed fracture in the temporal region.
Figs. 2-6.—Differing positions of the skeletons within the graves.